
The Wayana Indigenous Peoples in Suriname and Conservation NGO's: A "true love" story?

Conservationist NGOs working in the South of Suriname have increased the pressure for Wayana Indigenous Peoples. After years of harsh top-down and paternalistic ways of dealing with forest communities, the Wayana have decided to seek for their own path, one that follows their own way of thinking and living.

The Wayana indigenous peoples mainly live in the South of Suriname (they also live on the border with French Guiana and in a small area in the North of Brazil) in approximately 30,000 km² (3 million acres) of tropical rainforest. The total Wayana indigenous group consists of approximately 2,500 people. In Suriname, they live in three small settlements near the river, namely in Kawemhakan, Apetina and Palumeu. In French Guiana they live in eight small villages and in the North of Brazil they live more dispersed with other indigenous peoples. Recent excavations show that **indigenous peoples lived in this area for more than 4000 years**. Their livelihoods depend on agriculture and fisheries.



Because of the limited infrastructure in this area and the dense jungle of the Northern Amazon territory, the Wayana were never colonized. At the beginning of the 20th century there were a few adventurers and employees of the Dutch colonizers searching for the gold in the Wayana area. But they (almost) never interacted with the Wayana people. Although the contact was limited, the Europeans brought numerous diseases like influenza and tuberculosis. Each of these diseases brought destruction through sweeping epidemics. This got worse when the Wayana decided to go to the capital of Suriname to buy/trade the so much desired iron tools directly from the source, bypassing the middle men, the Maroons of Suriname. (1) The Wayana were decimated to the brink of extinction. Around 1960 there were only 500 to 600 Wayanas left (we estimate that there must have been more than 4,000 Wayana in the beginning of last century). The only reason the Wayana still exist is the intervention of the Church in the decades of the 1950-60. The missionaries gave them medicines for the new diseases. The problem was, of course, that the Church also introduced new rules and forbade certain cultural expressions. Today, the Church is still present, but there is a kind of combined symbiosis belief, with church traditions and traditional knowledge/culture.

Some advantages of the (until recently) isolated existence of the Wayana are that we still speak our own language, we have retained a large part of our culture heritage and we are strongly aware of our roots. The disadvantage is that there is little formal education and therefore **hardly anyone speaks a foreign language**. Unfortunately, **both the government and the "conservation" NGO's have taken advantage of this situation**. Many promises have been made and many Wayana people have signed documents in foreign languages (which they could not read) but nothing really changed to our benefit. On the contrary, the situation in our territory just became worse.

The new settlers: Conservation and dispossession

The pressure on the Wayana communities has started to increase recently, with so-called conservation NGO's operating in our area: **the WWF, Conservation International (CI) and the Amazon Conservation Team (ACT)**. These organizations come as "new settlers" to our area, pretending to want to help us with "development". Rather the opposite is true. Where we first lived without problems and in a sustainable co-existence with our forest, **we now have to deal with new rules. We can no longer perform some of our traditional activities. For these NGO's it is just a money-making business, but for us, it is our life!**

The way these NGOs communicate with the indigenous communities is without any respect. Our right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) is not implemented, even though they claim that they do so. The "Informed" part they execute indeed, but not the rest. **They have a top-down approach**. They always assume that we, the indigenous peoples, will not understand it anyway, so they take the decisions. **They assume they know what is good for the indigenous peoples (but they are only thinking about their own profits).**

With beautiful photos of meetings and by telling fantastic stories to their donors, they want to prove that all indigenous peoples have agreed with their project plans. A good example is the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that ACT signed for the creation of the Guiana Amazonian Park. This Park is a conservation area on the border of French Guiana and Suriname. Because the Wayana people live on both sides of the river, a part of the population is living in this Park now. There are all sorts of restrictions inside the Park, special hunting and agriculture areas and so on. The Wayana on the Suriname side do not want to live in a restricted area, controlled by the government and NGOs.

The MOU was signed in my village, which is on the border of Suriname and French Guiana. They took a group picture including my Paramount Chief, Ipomadi Pelenapin, the day they signed the MOU, as if he also had signed and agreed with the MOU, which he did not. **Till this day we do not know the content of this MOU, even though we have asked them several times for a copy.** We only know that it is about activities in the area of my Paramount Chief, but we do not know what they are going to do or what to expect.

Power inequalities

Since 2015, CI, ACT and WWF collaborate to "save" southern Suriname with the SSCC project: the South Suriname Conservation Corridor. This protected area constitutes about 70,000 km². Only 3,500 indigenous peoples live in this area (Wayana and Trio) but **we are forbidden to cut trees for making our houses or canoes**. There is no infrastructure and the area is only accessible by airplane or several days' travelling by boat. So communicating with the 9 different villages within this large area is a huge challenge. On paper, they have created an organization that seems to show that we, the indigenous, have ownership over the project. However, in practice, that is not so. The

indigenous peoples in the project organization have no tools or ability to communicate among each other. The only times they come together (a few times a year) is when **the NGOs organize meetings. And so, the NGOs are always present, they determine the agenda, they facilitate the meetings and especially important, they determine the speed of decision-making.**

There is never enough time to discuss things among us in order to understand the different subjects. Because there is **a language barrier**, it takes a lot of time to translate and to explain the subjects in detail. The current Trio and Wayana indigenous leaders speak their native languages, only a few of them understand a little bit of Dutch or Surinamese. One would expect that the NGOs would take that into account, but that has not been the case. There are interpreters present but they are not provided with information on the subject in advance. How can an interpreter translate or explain buzzwords like 'sustainable forest management' or 'cultural biodiversity' during the meetings? Recently, the indigenous leaders found out that **the word "development", a word that is used very often by the NGOs, was literally translated in the Wayana language as "help me"**. When I heard about this, I started to make a list to standardize the translation of the buzzwords that are used in these meetings.

NGOs and indigenous peoples do not communicate on the same level. And the **NGOs are not willing to put in time and effort to properly train interpreters**. Presumably they do that on purpose, as **it is cheaper and quicker this way**. We are proud indigenous peoples and are not always willing to tell NGOs that we do not understand them.

Protecting forests or protecting a model?

A recent negative experience is with the NGO WWF. In the beginning of 2018, we asked WWF to help us with the mapping of our territory. For 6 months, all Wayana communities intensively worked with WWF to prepare the start of the mapping project (with GIS software and LiDAR technology). We also planned to start a field research to validate the data and verify the stories mainly the Elders told us.

The thing the Wayana people need the most is legal land rights and demarcation of our territory. Up until now, **the government of Suriname does not recognize our rights**, despite that the Organization of American States (OAS) condemned the State of Suriname several times. **We considered the project with WWF as an ideal way for us to get proof (including archaeological research and findings) that the Wayana have been living in this area for thousands of years**, so that we can start the dialogue with the Government. We also wanted to use the data against the illegal gold mining in our area. **Banning illegal gold mining is one of our priorities**. This activity brings all kind of consequences, like mercury pollution in the rivers, overfishing, deforestation and increase of violence mainly towards women due to the presence of the "*Garimpeiros*" (gold miners from Brazil who are mining illegally). **However, the Government and the conservation NGOs have shown, to our surprise, no interest in solving this problem.**

After we did all the preparations, in consultation with WWF (training the young people to use the computer and the mapping software, etc.), the project plan was written. To our surprise, after 2 months, we received an e-mail with one sentence: "we will not finance this because it does not fit within our WWF Forest program". No further explanation. **Further reflection led us to conclude that we are too critical about the SSCC program (which is also a WWF project in our territory), and that they think we are not accountable enough**. My Paramount Chief has indicated that WWF as well as ACT and CI are no longer welcome in this territory. He said: "Let them conserve the forest in Paramaribo", the capital of Suriname.

Also, none of the NGOs seems to be bothered that **some of the Wayana villages have no school at all**. The only option is to send the children to French Guiana (daily by boat), but the French Government only tolerates this till 5th grade. Then, only the parents who have a French nationality (or both) can send their children to a school far away from home, in a boarding school. The costs are more than 4 times an average Surinamese income (for people living in the cities), and this while there is hardly a money economy in the villages. In addition, children get an education in the French school-system and not in the Dutch one (Dutch is the official language of Suriname). For children to proceed with their study in Suriname in a language they cannot speak nor write and succeed is nearly impossible. Besides this being barely payable for parents.

“We are going to do it ourselves”

In April 2018, our Paramount Chief created the Mulokot Foundation. He had enough of all the disappointments and insults to the Wayana people. **The Foundation - from and for the Wayana people - enables the participation of the traditional leaders**. With this, he wants to bring our own “development” and decide which projects have priority and which ones should not be implemented. The NGOs, and to a lesser extent, the Government, do not take this seriously, but we do. They also openly call into question the quality and level of the members of the Foundation.

Along with the traditional leaders, we developed a vision with three main goals:

- **Sustainable territorial management by the Wayana people** starting with mapping our territory (in order to define our limits, rights and autonomy);
- The establishment of **an Indigenous Education Institute** (combination of western and indigenous knowledge, data collection and documentation of our heritage and culture) for our youngsters and our future; and
- **Food sovereignty** with different ways of agriculture, domestication of wildlife, etc.

The most remarkable thing is that **most NGOs do not want to support our Indigenous Education Institute**. The argument is that to construct a building, one needs to use wood from the area, which seems to be worse than the lack of education in our communities and to help providing an education that uses our indigenous knowledges. We understand that our forest is essential for the future, indeed for the future of all. However, **our people have been living in this forest for generations and the forest is still thriving, what are they so afraid of?**

Now our Paramount Chief has decided to stop all ‘conservation’ NGOs that are active in our area. We are going to do it ourselves and we will look for partners that fit with our way of thinking and living. **It will not be easy, but our whole existence never was.**

Our motto: **Nothing About Us Without Us!**

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(1) Maroons are referred to the African descendants in America who formed settlements in the forests escaping from slavery.

